On the Road to Adulthood
You’ve Gotta be a Social Thinker

BY MICHELLE GARCIA WINNER, M.S., CCC-SLP, AND PAMELA CROOKE, PH.D., CCC-SLP

By now you are an older teen or young adult and you’ve started to consider what you want to do with the rest of your life. You probably also realize some of your many strengths as well as your weaknesses and, if you are like most of us, you will want a job or career that focuses on your strengths.

If you are reading this article, you may have also experienced some very real challenges with social learning and have probably grown frustrated by the complexities of the social world and questioned whether you should bother learning any more about it. But you are also aware that no matter what job you choose, you will most likely have to deal with people on a daily basis. Therefore, continuing to learn about social information is pretty important.

This article is about teaching you to become a better “social thinker” so you can understand how to apply related social skills. Our work is connected with the work of Brenda Smith Myles (The Hidden Curriculum), Carol Gray (Social Stories and Comic Strip Conversations) and Tony Attwood (Exploring Feelings). You have likely already learned some good information, but as you get older social learning continues to evolve and change. The cool thing about growing older is that you can think more clearly about stuff that was more confusing when you were younger. We see people your age that continue to make some really terrific gains when we teach them more about “thinking about what people are thinking.” Now that you are older, we think you can learn more to help yourself.

Here are some brief thoughts to introduce a really big concept to motivate you to keep on learning even if it is hard.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY “SOCIAL THINKING?” SOCIAL THINKING JUST MEANS THINKING ABOUT SOCIAL STUFF… RIGHT?

Here’s social thinking in a nutshell:

I have a brain and you have a brain. My brain has thoughts and yours does too. Sometimes we are thinking the same thing, but most of the time we have our own separate thoughts. In other words, when I share space with you (which means when I am physically near...
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When people do what is “expected” (e.g., follow the hidden rules), you have pretty normal thoughts about them; when others do what is “unexpected,” you may have weird thoughts about them. The clincher here is that thoughts lead immediately to feelings or emotions. Weird thoughts almost always lead to uncomfortable feelings, while normal thoughts usually lead to calm or comfortable feelings. People have thoughts but they react to their feelings. Realize that you have memories about how people make you feel. So, if you already do all this “social thinking” about people around you, imagine how much social thinking people do about you as well. The word “social” implies we are all thinking about each other.

The hardest part of this is figuring out what are expected and unexpected behaviors in different situations. This isn’t always obvious since most people don’t tell you what is expected and just assume you should know. For this reason, we call expected behaviors the “hidden rules” (Smith Myles [2004] calls this “the hidden curriculum”). They are “hidden rules” because most teachers or parents never really teach these—we are just supposed to figure them out. People who have to work harder at social thinking also have to work harder at figuring out the hidden rules.

In fact, they might need to ask others for a deeper explanation of the “hidden rules” because they are not posted in writing on any wall.

**WHY SHOULD I CARE ABOUT SOCIAL THINKING?**

The simple answer to this question is because how you think people think about you affects how you feel about yourself.

The longer answer to this question is that people and their related thoughts (as discussed above) are everywhere.

The reality is that none of us really want to judge other people, but we do so anyway based on the ways in which we think about them (e.g., their physical appearance, actions, words, etc.). If you’re honest with yourself, there are those you dislike or avoid because you think they act like they are better than everyone else, they don’t seem to say anything worth your time or they don’t like you.

It seems that part of social thinking is for each of us to recognize that our brains are set up as mind-reading mechanisms—which means we are having thoughts about people all of the time we are around them, even if we are not talking to them. It’s pretty important to realize that the type of social thoughts we are having about people affects how we feel about them. Thoughts and feelings go together like an iPod and earphones. We can talk about them differently, but when we use them we use them together.

From our experience, people who are very high functioning on the autism spectrum have some level of mind-reading in place. In fact, many know that people try to trick or manipulate them, and many students we work with try to manipulate others themselves. However, it is likely their social minds may not be as efficient in processing a ton of social details as quickly (milliseconds to 2 seconds) as their socially wired peers.
So, here’s the deal. You do care about what people think because you ultimately care how you feel about you. You can’t really turn your mind off to people even if you avoid them all of the time. Even when you are by yourself it is hard to keep your mind from thinking about people (“Why is that guy at school such a jerk to me?” or “How can I figure out how to become friends with that person in my math class?”).

From our experience, it is very common for teens and young adults with social learning challenges to say they really don’t care about people or making friends, but those same people are often really sad, depressed or anxious because they have not been more successful at getting people to have more positive thoughts about them.

**CAN I BE “SOCIAL” AND STILL KEEP MY “ALONE” TIME?**

Of course, you can keep your alone time. Most of us don’t really want to be around people all the time. That would be stressful and annoying after a while. We all need time to be alone, and being a teen or young adult is no different. You just have to make sure you have healthy “alone” time carved into your day.

It is also important to know that each of us has our own personal balance point for social interaction. Some of us want to be around others most of the day, while others want to be with people, but only for about 30 minutes or an hour a day. Some of us really like to hang out in big groups (groups larger than three), while others only like to be in smaller groups or even with just one other person. There is no mandate that you must socialize all day or at every class break as long as you are still seeking some social balance and not total social isolation or avoidance.

But, there’s more. It’s really important that you figure out your social balance. This means you have to determine how much time you need to be around other people, interacting with them in a positive way, to make you feel like you are connected to the world around you, while still allowing you to follow your unique path. Social balance helps ward off anxiety and depression. You then have to seek your social balance goal actively.

At times, our students benefit from some direct teachings from a specialist to help them learn about others’ minds and come up with strategies to help them relate better and feel better about themselves. As you know, while some people make socializing look easy, it really is not that simple. The weird thing about school is that many people in charge of education don’t realize that there are a lot of smart students out there who are not gifted in understanding others’ minds. The idea of teaching social thinking and related social skills is just getting started, so be patient with your teachers as they learn how to help you learn about others.

If social balance is not established or maintained, we often see students “escape into their caves.” They over-focus on what their brains excel at and don’t push themselves to keep trying to learn more about areas in which they are not as gifted. When students live in their “caves,” they slowly withdraw from any type of social interaction, especially with peers, and insist that they would just rather stay in one place all the time (often their bedrooms, the computer room or the library). The problem with being in your “cave” is that it doesn’t allow your brain the practice it needs to relate to other people.

So, let’s talk a moment about “social practice.” Learning about your own and others’ social thinking and related social skills is not like getting a new computer—you don’t just turn it on and load the software for it to work for you. The appropriate use of social skills evolves from years of practicing social thinking across a range of people in different settings. Those born with social learning challenges need extra time to study and practice social thinking strategies, which is pretty hard to do all alone in a cave.

Even if you think you are getting practice chatting with
people online or engaging in role-playing games from your cave, these are much simpler ways to relate to people than when you do it in person. Interacting with people when you are physically next to them requires you to process and respond not only to their words (language), but also to their facial expressions, tone of voice, body language and situational cues—all of which are missing during online chats. To hold a job in the community or create relationships that lead to developing your own family requires you to practice and continue to learn more advanced social thinking strategies.

The reality is that having friends, making acquaintances or just being acknowledged by other people makes each of us feel more valued. Unfortunately, we have worked with many students who develop significant levels of anxiety and depression when they feel their peers do not value them. Problems with our mental health can lead to more extreme feelings of social isolation. It’s what we call a “Catch-22.”

We all need alone time balanced with some level of social interaction time. When our life gets out of balance and we don’t relate much to people outside our families, it is very common to feel depressed and anxious, which makes it even harder to try to relate to others. So, help yourself now by recognizing that you can do more to learn about relating to other people’s minds—and this is as good a time as any to start.

About the Authors

MICHELLE GARCIA WINNER, SLP, teaches concepts related to “social thinking” (www.socialthinking.com). She has worked with students with social learning challenges for the past 23 years and is also an author and internationally recognized workshop presenter.

DR. PAMELA CROKE, SLP, PH.D., is part of the clinical team at the Social Thinking Clinic and a member of the clinical faculty at San Jose State University. She recently published an article on the efficacy of “social thinking” in children with Asperger’s and high-functioning autism in the Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders.